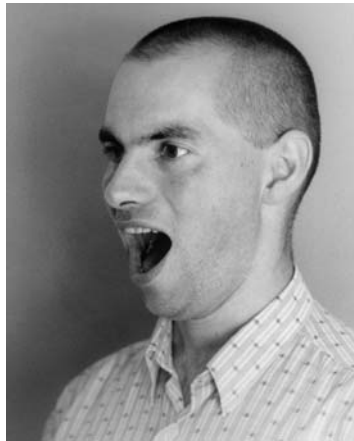


The Whispered Ah!

I have already pointed out that good breathing “does itself” – the only thing we can “do” to our breathing is mess it up. Clearly however we have a great deal of voluntary control over both the timing and the volume of each breath, and, to an extent related directly to the quality of our general use, we can exercise some choice over these aspects of our breathing without interfering with its basic healthy pattern. Among the advantages this flexibility brings is the ability to speak and sing in coherent well timed phrases. The ***whispered Ah!*** is a procedure concerned with maintaining inhibition and direction (and therefore good natural breathing) whilst making a specific demand on your breath; it is an opportunity to observe the modifications which have to take place in the breathing in order to use the voice effectively.

The whispered Ah! is a relatively advanced procedure which is useful to the experienced student because it can give an added stimulus to the back to work well. However, I often introduce it (often in a simplified form) to my students early on when, for example,

- The student has great difficulty in not holding her breath. This may be because of pain, extreme nervousness, or simply a habitual bracing.¹
- The student is a singer or wind instrument player. As quickly as possible, these people need to experience (through the Alexander Technique or otherwise) both the natural pattern of breathing and the range of its consciously controlled flexibility.²



Of particular interest to performers is the way in which the whispered Ah! can teach *reflex inspiration* – the natural, rapid, easy, silent, more or less automatic intake of breath which is necessary as part of your pattern of breathing if you are to avoid gasping, sniffing and wheezing between musical phrases. Alexander also recommended the whispered Ah! to sedentary workers as a means for recovering, during regular breaks, a normal flow of breath, compared to the tiny, almost “non-breathing” vital capacity of most office staff.

The Smile

The directions for the whispered Ah! include the seemingly bizarre admonition to “think of something funny to smile at”. This is worth explaining: overall pulling down inevitably includes the muscles of the face, so this direction is a reminder not to pull the face muscles and (importantly) the soft palate and larynx down, which would restrict the vocal apparatus. If the smile is one of genuine amusement, the muscles around the jaw release, the throat opens, the eyes sparkle.

The Procedure³

- Think of something funny to smile at.
- Open your mouth by letting your jaw fall, avoiding pulling your chin in towards your larynx or your head back (don’t open your mouth like a Muppet).
- Place the tip of your tongue at the top of your lower teeth.
- Do not “take a breath” but, wherever you are in the cycle of your breath, whisper “Ah!” loudly, openly and as long as your breath lasts. Stop before you have to “squeeze”.
- Close your mouth.
- Wait for the reflex expansion of your ribs to draw the breath in through your nose.
- Repeat for a series of several Ah!s on consecutive out-breaths.

Attentive listening is of great value in refining the whispered Ah! “Ah” represents the most “open” of all the vowel sounds; your whispered Ah!s should sound clean, round, bright, loud, not “breathy” or “strangled”, and should not commence with an explosive glottal constriction.

1 Many people, initially, are unable even to move into or out of the chair without holding their breath.

2 Even quite good singers, if their use is not all it might be, can find the whispered Ah! surprisingly difficult to perform convincingly.

3 Continuous inhibition and direction are assumed.